

Christocentric Friendships

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Individuals outside one's family are those which many call "friends." Human beings cannot live successfully alone. Each human life must encounter other human lives, resulting in the formation of a bond known as friendship. As observed from popular culture, the success or failure of friendships rests in commonalities shared with one another. But could there also be a greater meaning, an invisible, but ever-present partner to the experiences of friendship? This presentation will consider that friendships are more meaningful when they are "Christocentric" or centered on a spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ.

The ancient philosopher, Cicero, described friendship as "a mutual harmony in affairs human and divine coupled with benevolence and charity" (*On Friendship*, 32). Most traditional friendships exist in mutuality, kindness, and giving one to the other. Thus, Cicero's definition seems to suffice. However, his mention of two types of "affairs" by which friends exist in "mutual harmony" raises a question: *What is divine about friendship?*

Although never clearly stated, implicit in Cicero's definition is this notion of the presence of God. In the first letter of St. John, the Christian faithful are reminded that "God is Love" (1 John 4:8). In terms of Christian spirituality, the words "charity" and "love" are interchangeable such that one could infer that Cicero's definition of friendship implies relationship with God as a necessary element in friendship.

Considering the Different Types of Friendships

Are there friendships which are not "Christ-centered"? According to St. Aelred of Rievaulx from his work, *Spiritual Friendship*, there are three types of friendships. The first type of friendship highlighted by St. Aelred is "carnal friendship" and may rightly be called a type of "human friendship" that "springs from mutual harmony in vice" (*Spiritual Friendship*, 40). The vice spoken of by

St. Aelred is the desire for pleasure – be it sexual, or in the sense that what one receives from the other is not reciprocated, but rather is pursued selfishly. St. Aelred continues, "The real beginning of carnal friendship proceeds from affection... By means of the avenues of these senses it brings into the mind itself images of beautiful bodies and voluptuous objects" (*Spiritual Friendship*, 40). In modernity, St. Aelred's description of "carnal friendship" is likened to society's view of "casual sexual relationships," or what Donna Freitas of Boston University calls the "hook-up culture." She says that a "hook-up" is "any sexually intimate activity – which could be as innocent as kissing or could be intercourse – but what defines it is that it is casual, unplanned, and with no commitment" (Freitas, "Sex, lies, & hook-up culture.") This can be no true path to friendship, for as St. Jerome said, "A friendship which can cease to be was never true friendship" (*Letters* 3:6, PL 22:335). If love is present amidst true friendship, then it is reasonable to say that in "carnal friendships" – which are those only pervaded by lust – God's presence does not dwell amidst them.

The second type of friendship, known as "worldly friendship," is "born of a desire for temporal advantage or possessions, is always full of deceit and intrigue; it contains nothing certain, nothing constant, and nothing secure" (*Spiritual Friendship*, 41). St. Aelred concludes that this friendship is deceptive because, while one party believes that a true friendship is present, the other is only interested in what he may gain from the other. More precisely, it can be said that "each person receives some benefit from the presence ... of the other, and this is the basis for the relationship" (Cuddeback, 29). Apparently lacking within the "worldly friendship," as well as the "carnal friendship," is a solidifying element which holds the relationship together.

The Christian faithful view friendship as one of the four types of love

known as "philia" or "brotherly love." By definition, "philia" is "a love that is based upon mutual or shared interests" (Hanigan, 146). Here, the portion of the definition which speaks of "mutual or shared interests" alludes back to Cicero's understanding of friendship, in which he describes friendship as "mutual harmony." Mutuality exists within both "carnal" and "worldly" friendships, but the mutual interest in each of those can never have any type of permanence. In contrast, "philia," or "true friendship" – advances, and strengthens, through mutuality based on a sincere love of each person involved. "True friendship" is only able to continue successfully when the mutual interests of all involved are selfless, focused on the good and benefit of the other person. "Carnal" and "worldly" friendships contain aspects of mutuality, but for wholly selfish reasons. That said, "true friendships" are "a great gift and support in the human journey, and they are certainly among the clearest mediators of God's love to us" (Hanigan, 147).

In *Spiritual Friendship*, St. Aelred writes, "Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst" (*Spiritual Friendship*, 30). Here, St. Aelred introduces the third and most meaningful friendship for the Christian faithful – that known as "spiritual friendship." This "Christocentric" friendship is more meaningful than its lesser counterparts. "Spiritual friendship" contains a spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ. Because of the relationship with Christ, which dwells at the center, this is understood as the ideal friendship to seek. It is only through this friendship that the unattainable qualities (selfless concern, mutuality, shared interests, morality, virtuousness, etc.) of the other types of friendship become attainable. Additionally, "spiritual friendship" excels our simple, finite friendships and, "perfects" them, making them infinite and able to share in the divinity of Christ's Love. It is only "selfless," not selfish Love which comprises the nature of God.

The Role of Love

If “God is Love” (1 John 4:8), then one is able reasonably to infer that because God’s essence is that of love and friendship is a type of love, then God must truly dwell in the presence of friendship. St. Aelred adapts a verse from St. John’s first letter and replaces the word “Love” with the word “friendship,” so that the new verse reads: “he that abides in friendship abides in God and God in him” (*Spiritual Friendship*, 47). Pope Benedict XVI echoes the statement of St. Aelred, writing, “I learn to look on this other person, not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ. His friend is my friend. Going beyond exterior appearances, I perceive in others the desire for a sign of love and concern” (*Deus Caritas Est*, §18). The Pontiff’s words reveal three presences within “spiritual friendship” – God, self, and others.

One of the many theologically important truths about the Holy Trinity is that a relationship exists within between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Human beings are made “in the image of God,” so in reflection of the Holy Trinity, are capable of, and made for the purpose of relationships. The faithful come to understand that “true friendship” operates in a reflection of the Holy Trinity. Just as no person of the Holy Trinity can act independently of any other person because they are all always One, so also “true friendship” cannot exist apart from the unity of God, self, and others.

Ultimately, each party in friendship must interact. In order to have friendship with God, it is reasonable that interaction with Him can only be through the theological virtue of faith. “The invisible God, from the fullness of His love, addresses men as His friends, and moves among them, in order to invite and receive them into His own company” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* §142). Human beings are given an invitation to “friendship with God” and the appropriate response to this invitation is by relating personally with God through His Son, Jesus Christ. Through accepting truths revealed by God through Christ’s incarnation, human beings are given a glimpse into the type of person God actually is and can then meet Him in friendship through faith.

“Friendship with God” propels the individual to experience a type of Love independent of human possibil-

ity. Friendship is precious “because it comes from God, because it tends to God, because God is the link that binds you, because it will last forever in Him” (St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 131). God, in the incarnation of Jesus came to earth to repair the broken relationship between humanity and Himself. Out of the deepest possible expression of friendship, Jesus took the “divine initiative” to embrace the human condition. Jesus’ persistence to meet humanity in friendship despite rejection on the part of humankind leads inextricably into the notion of God’s forgiveness.

However, in the absence of “friendship with God” and “friendship with self,” there emerges a certain guide by which to navigate the waves of friendship: Love and “friendship with others.” Love is the theological virtue which best seems to express the value and importance of “friendship with others.” Our creation “in God’s image” allows for individuals to look outside themselves and within others, that they may adhere to Christ’s command to “love one another” (John 13:34). When one understands that he is created “in the image of God” just as is his neighbor, then the possibility of unity, benevolence and charity arises. These traits are cornerstones of what comprises friendship. It may be quite difficult to accept a command to “love one another,” especially when faced with those of whom one may not be fond. However, by loving other human beings, we in turn not only reflect the unconditional love of God, we also express love to God who dwells in the soul of each person. Ultimately, “the same act of loving God is the act of loving the neighbor” (Brady, 171).

The faithful are to love others in friendship as an expression of their love for God because God created all the “others,” which one may love and greet in the bonds of friendship. A contemporary example of “friendship with others,” propelled by love, to find value in fellow human beings’ creation “in God’s image” is a statement made by Douglas Brinkley in his book, *The Great Deluge*, which explores the worst natural disaster in U.S. history, Hurricane Katrina. Brinkley writes, “In the chaos that followed... there were many individual Louisianans who cared more about others than they did about themselves” (Brinkley, 328). Engaging in “friendship with others” ex-

tends one’s self into a place of vulnerability; indeed, there exists the possibility that one or both parties may be hurt at some point because of the actions of one or both members involved. However, St. Aelred’s understanding of “spiritual friendship” plays a role in placating this vulnerability: “Spiritual friends” love one another for the sake of each other and for the sake of God who is present within each other.

Spiritual Friendships

Christian faithful are encouraged to understand that “spiritual friendships” are developed out of selfless love for one another, with Christ as the greatest example. This is a vulnerable way of loving someone. And in human scope, we may encounter various stages of strength and weakness, spiritually speaking. Human beings, “begin that friendship here which is sure to endure forever there” (St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* 131) or in Heaven.

In conclusion, it is important to realize that “true and living friendship cannot thrive amid sin” (St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* 138). It is wholly possible to sin against others and often through sinning against others, we also sin against God. To live sinfully in friendship is to live in ways which produce no goodness in either member, such that love is suppressed. In friendship this occurs through slander, infrequent interaction, ignorance of one another’s well-being, and selfishness. Broken promises are also a great sin against the sacred bonds of friendship, for “St. Augustine contended that any lie, and any promise not kept, was a sin against God’s gift of speech” (Carter, 33).

The greatest sin in friendship, however, is the corruption of either or both members away from God’s presence. In such a case, a friendship fails to be true and thus dissolves into nothingness. In any case, it seems that a “Christocentric” friendship is more meaningful than one centered in selfish interests because of the living presence of Jesus, who dwells in the presence of the friendship.

In friendship that is centered in relationship with Christ through the harmony of God, self, and others, there can be no doubt of the truth in Christ’s own words: “For wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).

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